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## Comfort and Calories Add Up During the Holidays

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# COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

## *Selected News Releases*

### **Comfort and Calories Add Up During the Holidays**

ORONO, Maine -- Ever wonder how the terms "little old ladies" and "little old men" became so common and endearing? The answer is a good lesson to recall before you dig into the dip or reach for that second piece of pie during the food-centered holidays, according to a University of Maine fitness expert. These smaller, more active folks are still around because they have outlived their overweight, sedentary peers.

One-third of adults in the United States and one-quarter of the children are obese, meaning that more than 30 percent of their total body weight is fat, says exercise physiologist Nellie Orr. The average person gains five to seven pounds during the holidays from over-consumption and lack of activity, and far too many keep adding more bulk year after year. Orr earned her Ph.D. in exercise physiology from the University of Pittsburgh and is a faculty member in UMaine's Kinesiology and Physical Education program.

Holidays can be stressful and difficult for just about everyone, and painful for those suffering a personal loss. It's easy to gain consolation from overeating, especially high-fat comfort foods. But comfort isn't the only thing gained, Orr cautions. One pound equals 3,500 calories, so that extra seven pounds packed on during the holidays is the result of nearly 25,000 extra calories.

"Beyond essential fat, which is required for proper physiological functioning, extra fat is excess tissue," says Orr.

Like all tissues of the body, fat requires energy -- energy which is produced through the process of metabolism and supplied to the tissues by the cardiovascular system, she explains. The extra burden of the additional weight places excessive stress on the musculoskeletal system, which can lead to low back pain and joint pain. The result of the excess fat and the related stresses of transporting and nourishing it predisposes us to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and musculoskeletal problems and contributes to premature disability and death, says Orr. On the plus side, exercise and foods with a lot of nutrients help us function better, maintain good health and recover more quickly from illness or injury.

There are no "quick and easy fixes" to being healthy and fit, says Orr. Someone who has led a sedentary lifestyle for 20 years can't get in condition in two weeks, and those 20 pounds gained over the past two years can't be lost in two days.

American society is preoccupied with consumption, says Orr. "We talk about Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner, not the essence of the holiday. Thanksgiving is a day to give thanks, not to see who can eat the most. The more we realize the true significance of the holiday, the less likely we are to over indulge," she says.

Enjoy the traditions, but with some modification and certainly with moderation, Orr suggests. If possible, go for a walk, before and after holiday meals. The exercise, as well as the fresh air, is good for you. Walking a mile burns off 100 calories. That's a pound of fat a month, or 12 pounds a year. Always look for ways to expend calories, not for the closest parking spot.

Any kind of movement helps, but with remote control clickers that do everything from changing the channel to opening the garage door, our thumbs and forefingers often get the best work-out of the day. We even have wheels on our office chairs so we can roll from the desk to the filing cabinet, notes Orr, and we can run errands and get just about any kind of food by "driving through" and never getting out of our cars.

The biggest obstacle to healthy eating and exercise, during the holidays or as a matter of lifestyle, is attitude, says Orr, and she points out that the health and fitness industry has not always played a positive role. Often people are just overwhelmed with all the information about fat and calories and by fitness standards that seem unobtainable, so they don't do anything, she explains.

Instead of focusing on the product -- weight and aerobic ability -- we need to focus on the process -- eating healthy and exercising, says Orr. The outcome will take care of itself. The key is to feel good about yourself and to adopt a healthy relationship toward food. There's no such thing as "good" or "bad" food if eaten in moderation, says Orr. A good rule of thumb is to have more chip than dip, more potato than sour cream, and more bagel than cream cheese.

Orr also suggests:

- Savor and appreciate the food you consume.
- If you know you are going to an event in the evening where lots of food will be served, ease up on what you eat during the day.
- Be cautious with alcohol. In addition to other negative effects, many alcoholic beverages served during the holidays such as fruity punches and egg nog are loaded with calories.
- If you really like a certain food, don't be too restrictive. You will just overindulge later.
- Enjoy the food you prefer and don't punish yourself for eating unhealthy.
- Try to eat more foods that are high in nutrients.
- Teach others about making healthy food choices.
- When you receive high-calorie food as a gift, share some and freeze some
- Take every advantage to be more active
- Don't trick yourself into overeating with the promise that you will begin a rigid diet tomorrow. "Tomorrow" never comes.

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